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American Mystery Man Held in Iran

There is another, unreported American hostage sweating it out in an Iranian prison cell. He was dragged from his room at the Tehran Hilton by Revolutionary Guards more than 10 months ago and was accused of being a CIA spy.

His name is Zia Nassry. Until his ill-fated venture into Iran in March 1980, he was a New York City travel agent. His strange odyssey from a Greenwich Village apartment to a dank cell in Tehran's Evin Prison is a tale of heroism, danger, international intrigue and, above all, mystery. It was pieced together by my associate Howard Rosenberg.

On March 1, Nassry told his wife, Tur, that he was going to Tehran to open a clinic for Afghan refugees. The announcement did not surprise Mrs. Nassry. Her husband was born into a prominent Afghan family 34 years ago and came to this country as a youth. He attended Harvard Business School and became well known in the Afghan exile community. He also became a U.S. citizen.

Nassry had made two trips earlier in the year to Peshawar, the city on the Pakistan end of the Khyber Pass into Afghanistan. There, he told his wife, he had opened a clinic for the hordes of refugees fleeing Soviet invaders.

But in fact, according to our sources, Nassry had been smuggling weapons to Afghan rebels on his trips

to Peshawar. He had also made himself useful to exiled rebel leaders, arranging press conferences and acting as their contact with western reporters.

Eventually, however, Nassry took to describing himself as a rebel leader. Unimpressed, Pakistani authorities arrested him several times, and finally kicked him out.

It was then that Nassry made his decision to renew contact with Afghan rebels through Iran. But his plans went terribly awry.

The last contact Mrs. Nassry had with her husband was on March 8, when he called from London to say he was on his way to Tehran. When a month went by with no further word, his wife called the Tehran Hilton. A clerk informed her brusquely that Nassry had checked in on March 11, but added cryptically: "Someone checked him out."

After seven months of appeals for information to every governmental and private agency she could think of, Nassry's wife was finally contacted by a representative of the Swiss Embassy in Washington. The message was shattering: Nassry was alive, but in prison, charged as an American spy.

Sources in the Afghan exile community say Nassry was caught by Iranian police with several weapons in his hotel room.

Zia Nassry's true reason for being in Tehran remains a mystery. If he

was an arms smuggler, he was a small-time operator and clearly inexperienced. If he was in fact a CIA agent, he kept it from his wife, who scoffs at the suggestion.

Nassry never seemed to lack for money, and he always traveled in style — though that would not be surprising for a successful travel agent. He stayed at posh hotels in Saudi Arabia, Egypt and Washington, and claimed to keep a permanent suite at the Khyber International Hotel in Peshawar. Yet during the Islamic Conference in Islamabad a year ago, Nassry had only a modest room at the Holiday Inn.

Nassry's father once headed Afghanistan's modest intelligence agency in the 1950s, but Nassry's connection with any American intelligence agency seems doubtful. What appears more likely is that Nassry is the victim not so much of circumstances as of his delusions of grandeur.

Glib and gregarious, Nassry has been described variously as a hustler, braggart, loving husband and father. In addition to his self-proclaimed ties to the Afghan rebels and his suspected connection with the CIA, Nassry is rumored to be mixed up with the Soviet secret police and the Muslim Brotherhood. Such rumors might well have originated with him.

Whatever Nassry is — con man, spy or hero — this much is certain: He is a prisoner of the Iranians.